



# DIOCESE OF PHILADELPHIA AND EASTERN PENNSYLVANIA

*The Most Rev. Mark, Archbishop of Philadelphia • Orthodox Church in America*

## Chancellors Report 2025 Diocesan Assembly

For many in our diocese this year has been marked by transition, gains and losses, personal and institutional. One could be tempted to say we are living at the end of an era, not only in our church but in the world at large. Such reflections, accurate I would contend, can elicit feelings of sadness, regret, resentment, anger even. Those tempted by such thoughts are focusing on the end, but not attending to the fact that every ending marks a beginning. The end of one era is the beginning of another.

In such instances, it is foolish, not to mention counterproductive, to enter into such new eras either with the intention of rejecting all that has gone before, or insistently attempting to revive the past. The past is just that, past. The future, the shape and substance of the new era, is significantly in our power to inform and direct. In the Church such information and direction should not come from our own minds or hearts, but from the Word of God and through the operation of the Holy Spirit, to which we are all called to be attentive and obedient. Such attention and obedience requires we prayerfully discern God's Will in the midst of present events, finding ways to be good and faithful servants of our Heavenly Master and of one another.

What do we need? We need pastors for the sheep to assist the hierarch in his unique ministry as the chief shepherd, who can preach and teach, who can serve the Divine Services with knowledge and reverence, who can comfort and counsel, as well as admonish and correct, but in a spirit of truth that is well seasoned with love. We are blessed to have such in our diocese due to the diligent work of many inside and outside the diocese, in parishes, monasteries and seminaries.

We need people, sheep to be shepherded, not simply in the spirit of an earthly community, but as a community on earth whose purpose and goal is the fullness of the Kingdom to come, manifesting it in the present by living Christian lives that distinguish us by our mutual, self-sacrificial love of God and neighbor. Body count is not a sufficient indicator of pastoral care and education and witness. The quality of the shared life of each parish is key: the attendance at Divine Services, Sunday and Festal, the pursuit of education for adults as well as children, the service of those in need within our parishes as well as in the broader communities in which our parishes are found. That takes constant effort, personal and communal, by clergy and laity alike. And though it is the rule in civil society, the 80/20 rule should be neither normative nor acceptable in the Church. Everyone can contribute in some way, to some degree, in the spiritual life of the parish.

And we have such communities in our diocese, even those which, when measured by raw numbers may seem insignificant, but are not. And others which have the potential for spiritual growth not yet realized.

Key to the future is the preparation of the youth of the present and we have invested human and financial resources in providing retreats, including the one upcoming, which have brought out not

only large numbers of our youth, but also adults capable and willing to assist in making these spiritually and socially enriching experiences for all involved. Thank you to them and to you, who have provided the resources to do so. Yet much remains to be done. As blessed as we are in what has been accomplished, it is the beginning, not the end.

Many of our parishes are experiencing noticeable interest and growth from inquirers, most of whom become catechumens, most of whom are received into the Church. Again, a beginning, not an end. We should note several things about this phenomenon, which may mark the new era that is upon us.

They have found us. Much as we might think otherwise, we have not done a very good job making our presence, let alone our substance known to the world around us. Yet they have found us. And they stay because of what they find: the Orthodox Christian faith. They are not looking for huge institutions with worldly influence and power. They are not looking for churches which will mirror the world in which they have grown up and are immersed. On the contrary. Neither are they looking for churches that seek to tailor their beliefs and practices to what they think the people want. They seek rather a Church that knows what all of us need, where it is to be found, and how to experience it. Insofar as we have been faithful to the faith we have received, we are receiving those who the Lord is drawing to Himself. We need to be ready and able to receive them. One could see this as a promise to us that if we remain faithful to our dogmatic, liturgical and pastoral inheritance we will be renewed with new sheep.

Of course, that brings with it its own challenges, which we as a Church need to recognize and respond to with sobriety and care. Newly received members should be nurtured in parishes for years, gradually involved in the ministries and oversight of parish life. To that end we have the example of those who have gone before us.

This year the community of Holy Resurrection Cathedral voted and requested from the archbishop that the parish be officially closed. This was a shock to many outside the parish and the diocese. Dwindling membership and massive structural issues in the building, with an insufficient financial resource to meet the challenge led to this. Fortunately, the community had and has found a home in Holy Trinity, Wilkes-Barre, which itself came out of Holy Resurrection decades ago. The union of these two communities has been outstanding in its spirit of love, cooperation and consolation. It represents a great challenge for all involved but is a credit to the people of both communities and the clear, kind, attentive leadership of Fr. Innocent Neal. They are providing a model for others to follow, yet need the ongoing support of our diocese through our prayers and physical assistance in the preservation of the material memory of the life of the community.

Regrettable as this closure is, especially with the association of the community with St. Alexis of Wilkes-Barre, it does not represent a statement or verdict about his apostolic labors. His legacy to the Church is not any one community, but the Orthodox Church in America, whose foundation was laid to a great extent by his labors in Minneapolis and Bridgeport, but especially in our diocese. How many of our extant communities can trace their existence to his labors? And by what were they guided? The provision of a spiritual home for a people from another land who were in danger of losing themselves in the very different world of North America, with opportunities and temptations rarely if ever experienced at home. His goal was to inform their lives so that whatever the details of daily life in this country, his people would have what was necessary to remain faithful and to discern what in this new world was good and true and beautiful, and gave glory to God...and what did not. That mission continues, and is evidently successful to a degree, insofar as another people, native to the soil of this land but alien to the cultural life of the day, seeking a solid ship in which to sail the stormy seas of life, equipped to navigate and overcome the threats above and below the waters, come to these parishes or others born of them.

Therefore our challenge in this new era is to continue his mission, attentive to the particular temptations facing our own people, knowing which of the resources of our Holy Tradition are especially helpful in meeting these temptations and in healing those who have succumbed to them, and also how to apply those resources. To this end we are already engaged in monthly meetings of the administration with the archbishop, during which clergy assignments and clergy needs, as well as pastoral development in our parishes and other ministries, are reviewed and actions decided. We are blessed to have three excellent deans, each of whom wears numerous hats, but who bring sound judgment, along with a breadth and depth of experience to their deanery responsibilities. We are also blessed with new clergy who bring vitality and zeal and love for Christ's Church, who are being guided by the deans in their pastoral ministry. And we are blessed by older clergy, now completing two or more decades of service, who labor with the desire to foster faithful communities and a cooperative and healthy presbyterate. We should also note with appreciation the service of our deacons, to whose ranks we added this year with the ordination of Fr. Deacon Gregory Polk. And there are more on the way if the current class of the diaconal program completes their studies under the direction of Fr. Victor Gorodenchuk. Deacons are bi-vocational and so bring with them, in a more direct way than full time priests, the challenges facing our parishioners in the world outside the Church. And for those people, they provide a crucial example of how to be in the world but not of it. And we also have a large core of laity throughout the diocese who serve their parishes and the whole diocese selflessly and sacrificially with their time, talent and treasures. The good news is there is room for more to step up and find ways to participate more directly in the mission of the Church. This includes the Diocesan Council, which needs some new members this year, parish councils, parish ministries and diocesan ministries. On the latter we have had an excellent response to our needs for adult volunteers for our youth ministries. We need to cast our nets for those willing to help with young men's and women's outreach.

As ever, I am grateful for the support I receive from His Eminence and my brother clergy. I will miss Father Nicholas Solak's contributions to our diocesan life, but am consoled by the continued blessing of his friendship, and that his new mission is one that he is uniquely well equipped for and will benefit so many other clergy and their families, as he has in our diocese.

It was my privilege to serve as first priest at the funeral of Fr. Michael Evans, who reposed this past year. He was a good and faithful servant of Christ in this diocese for over fifty years. Most of that service was in obscurity to the world and even to those whom he served. His humility and good humor were his hallmarks. May he dwell with the blessed! The same is true of Fr. Vladimir Petorak whose ministry in retirement was quite active and faithful to the end. His love for Christ, his obedience to successive bishops, and his genuine care for the sheep entrusted to him were the enduring traits of a ministry that spanned seven decades. Men such as these are examples for us to follow and cause for us to give thanks to God, that as He has provided in the past, He will continue to do so in the future. I am grateful for this unique opportunity to serve the diocese and ask your prayers for wisdom and strength.

Yours in Christ,

Archpriest Raymond Martin Browne  
Chancellor.